**Ethical considerations in educational research**

**1. Why do we need ethical guidelines for research with human beings?**

Human research has people at its centre and yet ‘…some terrible harms that have occurred to very vulnerable people as a result of participation in research’. (University of Tasmania, 2010)

Ethical research has the good of human beings at its core and yet there are risks as, despite good planning and intentions, errors and harm can occur. Australia, with high standards placed on researchers and research organisations, has relatively low risk, and as members of the global community it is unethical if we turn a blind eye to harmful practices elsewhere in the world.

Following the Nazi experiments of World War ll, the Nuremberg Code (1949) was developed to establish acceptable ethical standards in human research. Australia has The National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (Australian Government, 2007) which describes ethical guidelines as ‘an ethos that should permeate the way those engaged in human research approach all that they do in their research.’ (p. 3).

**The National Statement holds four principles and values** (p. 13):

* **Respect for Persons**
* **Research Merit and Integrity**
* **Beneficence**
* **Justice**

These principles and values‘shape the relationship [between researcher and participant] as one of trust, mutual responsibility and ethical equality (p. 11). Ethics committees, includingtheHuman Research Ethics Committee (Tas) Network, apply these standards to the many contexts in which research happens.

Babbie (2011), a US researcher, describes the same ideas under these headings:

* Voluntary participation, requiring informed consent
* Anonymity – when neither respondent nor response can be identified
* Confidentiality – when a response can be identified but will not be revealed publicly
* No harm (or minimal harm) to participants
* Handling the inevitable deception of research
* Revealing research shortcomings in analysis and reporting
* Institutional review boards, such as HREC (Tas) Network to apply standards in planning, conduct and review of research.

It is interesting to note cultural differences between Babbie (2011) and the Australian National Statement. Babbie frequently refers to participants in social research as ‘subjects’ while NSECHR, consistently reinforcing respect of human beings, specifically notes use of the term ‘participants’ rather than ‘subjects’. (p. 11)

‘Respect for human beings is the common thread through all the discussions of ethical values.’ (NSECHR, p. 12)

So, the need for ethical guidelines comes out of a history of blatant abuse of human beings in the name of research. As research is supposedly for the betterment of human beings, we need guidelines that ensure respect for people in all aspects of research.

**2. What special requirements are needed for working with children under 18?**

The NSECHR (Australian Government, 2007) describes concern for children participating in human research – children’s capacity to give informed consent, pressure from adults to participate and parental values and interests that differ from the child.

Below is a summary of the requirements for researching participants who are under 18 years:

* The purpose of the research must be to the benefit of children or young people and their participation necessary to the research goals.
* Research with children and/or young people as participants must have methods appropriate to their developmental stage.
* The research design must consider the vulnerability of participants under 18, their capacity to give informed consent and discussions about consent need to be at a level the child can comprehend.
* The young participant’s well being must be considered at all times during the research.
* A young person can participate without parental consent if the review body is satisfied their maturity level is adequate to give informed consent. The research must be low risk and benefit the specific group to which the young person belongs.
* ‘Standing consent can be given over a specific period of time when informed consent is given and parents are informed of different projects as they arise.
* A child or young person’s refusal to participate must be respected but may be overridden by parents if they consider participation is in the child’s best interests. In educational inquiry the validity of data from a coerced child or young person would need to be considered.
* Consent can be withdrawn at any time without any loss of respect.

(NSECHR, 2007)

**3. How can we insure that ethical guidelines are followed?**

Ethical guidelines only have influence if they are followed. Responsibility for the conduct of ethical research sits with the following:

* Researchers and their supervisors
* Human Research Ethical Committees (HREC’s) to conduct and review research
* Institutions to set up processes of ethical review
* Employees who undertake research activities
* Funding organisations
* Agencies who set standards
* Government who endorse standards such as NSECHR and where legal system is the ultimate insurance of ethics in research

Australia’s code of conduct for research, the National Statement (Australian Government, 2007), was developed by the National Health and Medical Research Council, Australian Research Council and Australian Vice-Chancellors’ Committee, all key stakeholders in research. This statement includes requirements for human research ethics committees (HRECs), their scope, membership, processes and responsibilities.

Some organisations, such as The Australian Sociological Association, have their own codes while the Australian Psychological Society refers to the National Statement for its ethical guidelines in research. The National Statement (2007) holds ‘responsibility for ensuring that research is reliably monitored lies with the institution under which the research is conducted.’ (p. 91) In my organisation I could not find any guidelines or review system on the intranet that related to ethics in research with human beings as participants. Presumably staff and students are guided by codes in specific professional areas.

Having a national code, jointly constructed by research-driven organisations and endorsed by the federal government, presents a united front on the ambiguous area of ethics. Babbie (2011) lists several organisations in US with separate codes (p. 78); no doubt there are many others and there does not seem to be a national code. Although the NSECHR is 98 pages long, hopefully there is greater clarity in interpreting what is ethical (and unethical) research.

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